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Christianity and other Religions

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Christianity and other Religions

THREE SHORT SERMONS

BY

S. R. DRIVER, D.D., AND W. SANDAY, D.D.

CANONS OF CHRIST CHURCH

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NOTE

It happened to fall to us as Canons of Christ Church to succeed each other in residence at the Cathedral in the weeks immediately preceding the Congress for the History of Religions which has just been held in Oxford; and we thought it our duty to do what we could to enable the citizens of Oxford, or such of them as formed the Cathedral congregation, to understand what was going on and to take their bearings as to its relation to their own religious life. And we have been led to think that these simple sermons might perhaps prove helpful to wider circles of Christian people. The first two sermons were preached by Dr. Sanday, and the third by Dr. Driver. The changing character of the congregation unfortunately necessitated a certain amount of repetition.

S. R. D.
W. S.

Christ Church, *Sept.* 19, 1908.

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I

'He made of one every nation of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us: for in Him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain even of your own poets have said, For we are also His offspring.'

Acts xvii. 26–28.

Much has been heard of late on the subject of what is often called 'Comparative Religion', which is a shortened and not very accurate expression for 'the comparative study of Religions'. The subject came up more than once and with some degree of prominence at the recent Pan-Anglican Congress, and in little more than three weeks' time an international Congress, on the usual scale of science congresses, will be held here in Oxford. This is called a Congress on 'the History of Religions', which is substantially the same thing. The Congress is held once in four years, and the approaching one is the third in the series, so that the subject

is comparatively new, and the science may be regarded as still in its infancy. It is just an example of the tendency which is characteristic of the present day to apply the comparative method of study to all the great subjects of interest. The object of the study is to collect facts from every possible quarter bearing upon the history of Religion, and then to compare them together in such a way as to contribute towards that great constructive history of the growth and progress of religious life and practice in the world which is as yet far beyond the powers of any one man.

The study embraces all religions from the very lowest to the very highest, from the most rudimentary notions and practices of backward races like the bushmen of Africa or the aborigines of Australia to Christianity itself. Hence it is not surprising that in its earliest stages the new science was regarded somewhat askance by many good people as invading what was for them a sacred region, and treating too much upon the same footing things that were for them as far apart as light and darkness. It is indeed one of the many shocks which the religious people, especially of this generation,

have had to bear, and to which they are becoming gradually accustomed. In so many ways the faith to which they are deeply attached, and which is for them the object of so much reverence, has come to be studied as the phrase is 'objectively', that is, in a cold and dispassionate spirit, to have the facts in regard to it collected and registered and classified and tabulated, and placed by the side of similar collections in regard to religions of which they have been in the habit of thinking as only false and evil. Fifty years ago I suppose that it was the custom to divide religions into true and false. There was in fact but one true religion, and all the rest were false, only perhaps with different degrees of blackness. It was like the land of Goshen in the Ninth Plague, when there was thick darkness over all the land of Egypt, while the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.

This was the old way of looking at things; and now it is beginning to break down; indeed it has to a great extent already broken down. And now we are already coming to see that, in spite of the shock that was involved at first, there is really a gain from the newer views

and from the habits of thought which they have brought with them. Not only are these habits more in accordance with the actual truth of things, but they tend to justify the ways of God to men as they had not been justified before.

Certainly we are not all called upon to engage in the dry and cold investigations which constitute the comparative study of religion; but it is important that we should try to understand and appreciate the effect which these studies cannot but have on our own beliefs and our own way of looking out upon the world. And we may presently come to see that that effect is not a loss but a gain.

In the days when the Christian religion seemed to be a circle of light and all the rest of the world dark, was there not a very serious reflection upon the justice and goodness of God? Was not the privilege reserved for the few almost as much fraught with danger for them as the unqualified condemnation pronounced upon the many? was not the risk almost as great of generating pride and self-righteousness on the one hand as despair and utter callousness on the other? That what would often seem the mere accident of birth should place one

man or woman or child within the reach of such privileges, while another by the same accident was altogether excluded from them, was enough to raise a doubt as to the divine government and ordering of the world. When it came to be seen that there was a series of infinite shades and gradations connecting the lowest with the highest, and that there was a constant upwards movement by which the lower was being gradually brought up to a level with the higher, the oppressive feeling of injustice was relaxed and mitigated.

It is hardly too much to say that the old view was not really capable of being fitted into any large and comprehensive scheme of Divine Providence at all. It was not in keeping with the analogies of nature. The universe does not consist of such glaring contrasts. It is rather an infinite series of ascending scales; a series in which the divine voice appears to be always saying to each one of the creatures whom it has called into being, Friend, go up higher.

Not only is the revised way of looking at things more in accordance with what is often called 'natural religion', i.e. our own reflections about the leading facts of the universe,

but it is also really far more in accordance with Scripture. The Book of the Acts contains as we know two brief reports of discourses by St. Paul addressed to Gentiles, whom we should describe as heathen. One was at Lystra; and in that the Apostle reminds his hearers that God had not left Himself among them without witness, in that He did good, and gave them from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, filling their hearts with food and gladness. The heathen, although they were heathen, were not forsaken by God and left wholly to their own devices. They too were recipients of His goodness; and they too responded to Him with their gratitude. The feeling of gratitude was embodied in, and made no small part of, their religion. The lifting up of hands, and the offering of sacrifice, was as much a humble acknowledgement of divine bounty with them as it was in the case of Israel. And although they made the mistake of worshipping God under the forms of wood and stone, still it was in the last resort the Power above them whom they worshipped, the Power in whom they felt that they lived and moved and had their being.

And then again there is this discourse at

Athens, from which I have taken my text: what a far better and truer conception does that give of Divine Providence than the crude and narrow views into which Christians had allowed themselves to lapse! They had almost forgotten that the world was one, that all mankind are brothers, that they were all made in the likeness of God, and all endowed with the irrepressible desire to seek after Him and find Him. 'He made of one every nation of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth . . . that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.' What a warm expression of brotherhood and aspiration, which no amount of ignorance and folly and sin could drown, but which through it all strained upwards towards the source from which it came!

Some remarkable discoveries have been made in recent years which enable, and indeed compel, us to do better justice to the ancient religions outside the Bible. Just forty years ago (in 1868) the famous Moabite Stone was discovered, which dates back to the time of Ahab, and shows that at that day the king of Moab used with reference to his god Chemosh lan-

guage very similar to that which for instance the Book of Kings uses with reference to the God of Israel, ascribing to Him all his victories and successes, and speaking in terms of real piety and devotion. Not long afterwards (between 1872–6) there were published the first copies of a Babylonian version of the story of the Creation and the Flood, which, although mixed up with a fantastic mythology and in a religious sense not to be compared with the Biblical version, was yet evidently parallel to this, and in all probability older than it. Quite recently (in 1903) we have had published an elaborate code of Laws, put forth by a Babylonian king nearly a thousand years before Moses, and testifying to an advanced state of civilization and to a strong sense of justice and desire to enforce it. Then again, from Egypt there has come evidence that a king, also older than Moses, was feeling his way towards the worship of one God, and showing real devotion to Him. And from Babylonia again we have a number of penitential psalms, which are markedly parallel to the Hebrew Psalms of the same kind, and express genuine self-abasement and repentance.

It is no doubt important to bear in mind, in studying these parallels, that similar language does not always carry with it real correspondence of feeling. For instance, the allusions to 'sin' are often to mere ceremonial transgressions, and do not convey the same deep sense of contrition as in the case of the Hebrew Psalmists. I believe I am right in saying that the Biblical religion always proves itself to be deeper and higher.

Nor can it be forgotten that these ancient religions outside the Bible all have in greater or less degree dark stains across them, often very dark stains. It is the mysterious presence of evil, which infects everything human, even the worship which man offers to God. Biblical religion on the whole kept wonderfully free from these stains, though we may not forget the cruelties and severities that were practised in the name of religion or the things that, as our Lord Himself explained, had been allowed to be written because of the hardness of men's hearts. God was all the time training His chosen people, and leading them on little by little to higher and better things.

Two conclusions seem to come out from these

comparative studies, both already indicated in the discourses of St. Paul in the Acts to which I have referred, and both I think helpful to us at the present day. I mean, first, the truth that God has not anywhere left Himself 'without witness'. Everywhere there have been those who have honestly sought after Him; and everywhere they have been permitted to see something of His power and glory. God made the conscience of men; and there have always been some who have tried to walk in the light of their conscience. And in their case, as St. Peter declared, God has shown that He is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is acceptable to Him (Acts x. 34, 35).

This is one truth; and the other is that, although Christianity and heathenism are not as it were two great water-tight compartments, with nothing of weakness and error in the one, and nothing of rightness or goodness in the other, yet that Christianity, the religion in which we ourselves have been born and bred, is really the crown of all God's dealings with mankind. It surely gives us a much better sense of the unity of things; it enables us to feel that God

is one, and that the universe is one, and that the whole human race is one, descended from the same common parents and tending towards the same common goal, with one Father in heaven, and one Saviour and Redeemer, to whom all these scattered races are to be brought, or brought back, in God's own time.

And the sense of this unity in things, and in the broad dispositions of Divine Providence, also helps us to the practical conclusion which was one of those that seemed to me to come out with especial clearness in the Pan-Anglican Congress, how gently and how tenderly we ought to deal with those of our brother men who have not enjoyed the same privileges in religion with ourselves. How eager should we be to carry to them the light of the Gospel, and how careful to commend the Gospel message in the spirit of charity and brotherly love. It is no idle and vain enthusiasm which aims at preaching the Gospel within this generation to all mankind; and in pursuing that enthusiasm it is not less important that we should add to it the care not to quench the smoking flax or break the bruised reed.

II

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that hath been made. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men.'

St. John i. 1–4.

I am trying on these two Sundays, last Sunday and this, to prepare the minds of those who may wish to be prepared for the Congress which is to meet here in about a fortnight. It is an international Congress, and its subject is the History of Religions. Scholars will come from all parts of the world, not only from these islands and France and Germany, but from Italy and Belgium and Holland and Sweden and Finland, from America and the Colonies, from India and Japan, in order to study together the History of Religions—not Christianity alone but all religions—to read papers and compare notes, and endeavour to make one step forward in digesting and mastering the vast mass of

material which lies before us, bearing upon the religions of all nations and all times.

I tried to explain last Sunday that in entering upon such a study as this no disloyalty is involved to our own religion. Of course the Congress as such is severely impartial. Its aim is science—to know and compare and understand. But it must not be thought that the Christian Religion suffers in any way from this. Rather we are helped to see what is God's purpose for the world as a whole, by what mysterious and wonderful ways all the nations of the earth have been led onwards so as to approach nearer and nearer to the knowledge of Him, until at last they shall be all gathered together in one, and there shall be one fold and one Shepherd.

I tried to show last Sunday how this large-minded and large-hearted outlook was really in accordance with the Bible itself. No doubt it is true that both in the Old Testament and in the New we see at work a principle of *choice*. God *chose* a particular nation, the children of Israel, to be the recipients of a special revelation. He chose the city of Jerusalem and the Temple on Mount Zion 'to place His Name there'. He chose a number of individuals—

prophets and priests and other holy men—in order that through them He might make known His own character and proclaim His will. We are repeatedly told that 'the Lord, the God of their fathers, sent to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending; because He had compassion on His people, and on His dwelling place' (2 Chron. xxxvi. 15). First of all, Israel was to be made His people—really His people, though they struggled against the call and were disobedient. And then they in their turn were to be missionaries to preach Him among the nations. They were to be like a city set on a hill, from which the word of God was to go forth. And then further, in the fullness of time, God who had at first spoken to the fathers by the prophets spoke on a larger scale to the whole world through His Son. We may see in all this the working out of a great law, the law of God's Providence—first the few, then the many; the few, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the many. It is like a stone dropped into a pool; the circles that it makes in the surface of the water go on widening, and ever widening. This has been the method by which God has carried out His great purpose

of salvation, which is ultimately to include the whole human race.

But it did not follow that, because there was this method of choice, of selection, of the use of certain special instruments and privileged peoples—it did not follow from all this that the rest of the world was therefore, as it were, 'outside the pale' of God's mercy. It did not follow that, because the heathen were suffered to be heathen and so in a manner to follow their own devices, therefore they were to be ignored and neglected altogether. As I tried to explain last Sunday, the earth is one, and the Providence of God is one, and all the peoples of the earth are the work of His hand, and they were made by Him to seek God, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him. There were to be degrees of closeness, degrees of privilege and of enlightenment, degrees in the mingling of good and evil in religion; but everywhere God left Himself some witness, and everywhere His Name was to be fully made known in His own good time.

When we have once grasped this idea, that the whole earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, that no nation is out of His sight, and

no people utterly forsaken by Him—I say, when once we have grasped this, we shall also see that no religion is really unworthy of study; there is none from which we may not learn something as to the purpose of God as a whole. We shall also, I think, be prepared to find that there are many more connecting links than we had been apt to suppose between Christianity and these other religions. I used an expression last time which may perhaps help to explain what I mean. I said that we are not to think of the Christian Religion as a great 'water-tight compartment' absolutely shut off from all other religions. On the contrary, we are coming to see more and more that there are many lines of connexion between them, that a process of give and take has been constantly going on. It is the special purpose of the Congress that is coming here to study this class of phenomena. It should gather together and bring to a head, in the way that such Congresses are intended to do, the researches and investigations in which individual scholars are engaged all the world over. And, as I have said, this particular kind of investigation, the tracing out of these lines of connexion between Christianity and other

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religions, is specially characteristic of the present time and is being prosecuted with greater activity than it had ever been before.

My object to-day is to give an illustration of this process—an illustration which may at once serve to show the kind of inquiry that is going on, and that may also show that it is a legitimate inquiry and one of which no Christian need be afraid or ashamed. For this reason I will choose an old example rather than a new one. I explained last time that this science of Comparative Religion, or the comparative study of Religions, is as yet a young one. It has been taken up in recent years with a great deal of zeal and enthusiasm; but, as usually happens in such cases, the zeal and enthusiasm are rather apt to outrun discretion. A great profusion of ideas and theories has been thrown out, which will need to be carefully considered and tested. And therefore, the example that I am going to put before you shall not be any new and untried speculation, but just an old observation that has been before the world for some time, and in regard to the main lines of which it may be said that scholars of all schools are pretty well agreed.

The example that I wish to give is one in which a Biblical writer, the evangelist St. John, has gone outside the Old Testament, outside Israel, and has taken over an idea and an expression that were to be of great importance in the history of Christianity. The idea is philosophical rather than in the strict sense religious; but philosophy and religion run up into each other, and did so especially at the time when Christianity came into the world. Much of the best thought of the time took the form of philosophy rather than religion.

You are well aware what a magnificent opening the Fourth Gospel has. It represents the concentrated essence of the Apostle's thought, the deliberately formulated expression in which at the end of a long life he summed up the conclusion to which he had come as to the Master whom he served. He wished to commend his own Christian faith, not only to his own brother Christians but to educated heathen. He wished to find a way of speaking that would within the compass of a single word convey the greatest weight and the profoundest depth of meaning in the language of Greek culture. In order to do this he made use of a term that

was not new but quite five centuries old. It was a term that in the kind of sense in which he was going to apply it had been first employed by one of the early Greek philosophers nearly six centuries before. I wish I had time to speak at length about these early Greek philosophers. To me they often seem to be some of the most astonishing people that history has to show. Their audacity of thought and keenness of insight seem to us almost unbounded. We have to remember that they had little or none of that accumulated knowledge of nature that the simplest among us possesses at the present day. They looked out into the world, the heaven above and the earth beneath, and they tried to put the secret of it all into a single word or a single phrase. Of course it was guessing, only guessing; but what guesses they were! Here is one of them. One of these early Greek philosophers, wishing to sum up the history of the world, of all that he could see, expressed it thus: 'At first,' he said, 'all things were together,' i.e. mixed up together or in confusion; 'then came Mind'—we should spell it with a capital M—'then came Mind and set them in order.' Crowded with being, as this

world that we see before us is, there is yet a method in it, a method and an order, a wonderful and beautiful order. Where did that order come from? what caused it? The answer is, Mind—Mind on what a scale! Mind, pervading, penetrating, ruling the universe. Can we to this day improve upon that? What is it that causes the order in nature, if it is not a supreme and sovereign Mind?

This, however, is a different word, and it was not exactly from this beginning that St. John derived, or at least directly derived, the train of thought which culminates in his Prologue. For this we must look elsewhere. There is one remarkable term which has more significance in Greek than in any other language under the sun. This is the term that in our versions is translated 'Word', when it is said, 'The Word was with God, and the Word was God.' With us a 'word' is the expression of a thought; but in Greek the same term covers both the expression and the thought expressed; it includes not only the outward utterance, but also the mental process that comes to utterance, and so it often stands for 'reason'. Thus another of the old philosophers came to speak of

'Reason' as a formative force at work in the world. And then, some three centuries later, an important school (the Stoics) took up this idea, and spoke of the Divine Word in the sense of Reason as diffused throughout the world, and imparting to it form and order. These views were widespread in the two centuries before and after the Christian era. These philosophers did not think of God, as we do, as a Person, but they thought of the Divine Reason as 'immanent' (as we say) in nature, i. e. dwelling in nature, pervading and permeating nature. And just about the time when our Lord Himself lived and taught on earth, a learned Jew of Alexandria, named Philo, combining this Stoic teaching with that of the Old Testament, made great use of this idea of the Divine Word or Reason as the instrument of all creation and revelation. And, although Philo did not exactly think of the Divine Word as personal in the sense in which we think of a person, he yet constantly personified it, and applied to it what we should consider personal language. He spoke of it, indeed, much as the Book of Proverbs and some of the Apocryphal Books speak of Wisdom, as 'a master work-

man' (Prov. viii. 30) enthroned by the side of the Almighty, and sharing with Him in the work of creation. In prosaic language this means that the work of creation was guided and ordered by Divine Wisdom or Reason. But Philo was so much in the habit of isolating these divine attributes as almost to give them a separate existence; he even goes so far as to speak of the Divine Word as 'a second God'. We can see how easily such language lent itself to a Christian construction. And it is, therefore, not surprising that St. John should take it up in the way that he does, and work it into the sublime opening of his Gospel. In the Prologue to the Gospel really two streams of thought meet: one derived from the Old Testament, and embodied in such sayings as, 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth'; 'He sendeth His word and healeth them'; 'He sendeth out His commandment upon earth, His word runneth very swiftly'; My word 'shall not return unto Me void', and the like. This is one stream, and the other (as we have seen) is derived from Greek philosophy. Both are united in that

single expression 'the Word'. In its Hebrew sense it is the Word of Divine command; in its Greek sense it is the creative Wisdom or Reason; in its Christian sense it is the union of both in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

My reason for referring to this now is not in order to enter upon an exposition of the Gospel of St. John, or of this particular teaching, but only in order to point to it as an example of the way in which the language of the Bible sometimes, and indeed often, has its roots outside the Bible. Instances like this serve to bind together the history of revelation with the history of religion outside the sphere of that special revelation which is contained for us in the Bible. It is in this direction especially that inquiry has been quickened in recent years, and that many points of unsuspected connexion have been brought out. We shall doubtless hear much of these lines and links of connexion when the Congress meets. Perhaps at the present moment the tendency is rather to exaggerate them, and to discover more of these connexions outside the Bible than really exist. But, however that may be, in any case there is no reason for the Christian to be disturbed

by them. It is only the Spirit of God sitting above the water-floods, directing the course of all things from the beginning, sifting out the good from the bad, and drawing together all those many-coloured threads of the world's history that meet in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

III

'For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same My name is great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense is offered unto My name, and a pure offering, saith the LORD *of hosts.'* MAL. i. 11.

MALACHI was one of the latest of the prophets: he prophesied about 450 years before Christ, some ninety years after the Jews had returned from their exile in Babylon to their native country. The Temple had been rebuilt; and public worship in it had been resumed. But a feeling of depression and discontent prevailed among the people. The expectations which earlier prophets had aroused had not been fulfilled. The return from Babylon had not been followed by the ideal glories promised by the Second Isaiah: the completion of the Temple had not, as Haggai and Zechariah had promised, brought in the Messianic age: Jerusalem was still thinly inhabited; bad harvests, troubles from neighbours, and general poverty, increased the disheartenment. A spirit of carelessness and indifference

sprang up among the people, and extended even to the priests. The people were remiss in the payment of tithe and other sacred dues: marriages with foreign women, and divorce, became alarmingly common. The priests, forgetful of the honour and reverence which are God's due, treated His altar with contempt, offering upon it blemished or imperfect animals, such as their own Persian governor would not think of accepting as a present: they performed the duties of their high office perfunctorily: they were open, it seems, to bribery; they permitted to one what they refused to another; uprightness and impartiality were not, as they should have been, the ruling principles of their lives.[1] Hear how the prophet describes them as speaking:—

'Ye say, Behold, what a weariness is it! (i. e. what a trouble the service of the sanctuary is!), and ye snuff at it (i. e. ye treat it with contempt); and ye bring that which hath been taken by violence, and the lame, and the sick; and ye bring that as an offering: should I accept this at your hand? saith the LORD.'[2] Better, the prophet exclaims, that the Temple should be closed altogether than that sacrifices presented

[1] Mal. i. 6–8, 13, 14; ii. 8, 9 *end.* [2] Mal. i. 13.

in such a spirit should be offered in it! 'Oh that there were one among you that would shut the doors, that ye might not kindle fire on Mine altar to no purpose! I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering from your hand.'[1] There follow the words of the text. Jehovah has no pleasure in Israel's offerings; for while He is honoured among the Gentiles, Israel dishonours Him. 'For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same My name is great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense is offered unto My name, and a pure offering: for My name is great among the Gentiles, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye profane it, in that ye say,'—not indeed in so many words, but practically, by treating Jehovah's table with irreverence,—'The table of the LORD is polluted; and His food is contemptible.' The honour shown to Jehovah by the Gentiles is thus contrasted with the dishonour and irreverence shown towards Him by His own people.

The passage is a remarkable one. The sacrifices of the heathen,—with the limitation, we must suppose, that they are offered seriously

[1] Mal. i. 10.

and earnestly,—are represented as offered to Jehovah, and as acceptable to Him. Malachi may have been led to this thought through his acquaintance with the doctrines of the Persian religion, which would be known in Judah at the time, and which were certainly purer and more spiritual than those of heathenism generally. But however that may be, the passage is a tribute to the truer and better side of heathen religion. The heathen do not know God, as He revealed Himself to the Jews: still there is such a thing as 'natural religion'; and in so far as heathen nations recognized a being, or even beings, higher than themselves, upon whom they believed themselves to be dependent, and to whom they offered tokens of gratitude, and reverence, and devotion, Jehovah, as the only true God, accepts such homage as offered to Himself. And He accepts the imperfect homage of the Gentiles, if it is the best that with their knowledge and opportunities they are able to give, in preference to the service of His own people, and even of His own ministers, if this is offered only perfunctorily, with heedlessness and irreverence. Malachi thus 'recognizes in the religious earnestness of the Gentiles a

form of devotion which Jehovah is willing to accept'.[1] His words even go beyond what is said by St. Peter in the Acts, that 'in every nation he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to Him' (Acts x. 35).

There is another text which deals with the same subject, though it treats it from a somewhat different point of view. The writer of Deuteronomy, in warning the Israelite against idolatry, bids him take heed 'lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun and the moon and the stars, even all the host of heaven, thou be drawn away and worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided (i. e. allotted) to all the peoples under the whole heaven' (Deut. iv. 19). The God of Israel is supreme: He assigns to every nation its objects of worship; and the veneration of the heavenly bodies—which was widely diffused in antiquity—by nations other than Israel forms part of His providential order of the world. Natural religion, though it may become depraved, as St. Paul points out (Rom. i. 21 ff.), is a witness to some of the deepest needs and instincts of humanity: in default of a purer

[1] Ottley, *The Religion of Israel* (1905), p. 161.

and higher faith, the yearnings of mankind after a power higher than themselves find in it legitimate satisfaction.

We have thus two texts referring to the religious worship of the Gentiles, one representing it as accepted by God, as offered to Himself, the other speaking of it as part of God's providential order of the world, and intended by Him to be practised by those nations who lay beyond the range of the higher light possessed by the Chosen People.

I have been led to refer to these texts in view of the approaching Congress for the History of Religions, which is to be held during the coming week in Oxford. A very large number of religions, ancient and modern, established in different parts of the world, are now known; and for many years past students interested in the subject have collected particulars about them, and compared the beliefs and practices current in them. From ancient times, we are almost daily learning more and more about the religion of ancient Babylonia, which probably, in some respects, has left its traces upon parts of the Old Testament: we also know much more than we did a century ago about

the religions of the ancient Egyptians, and other neighbours of the Israelites. The forty-nine volumes of the 'Sacred Books of the East', published in Oxford during a succession of years under the editorship of the late Professor Max Müller, acquaint us very fully with the religious beliefs and practices of ancient India, Persia, China, and other eastern countries: while the investigations of missionaries and travellers in modern times have taught us much about the religions of the native races of Africa, America, Australia, and, in a word, of nearly every part of the modern world. Naturally, in many of these religions there is much that is degraded, and superstitious, and cruel, and perverse: but if we look through all this, we shall generally find in them elements of truth, and evidence of sound and healthy instincts of humanity. Man is by nature a religious being. Religion is confined to no one time or place. Whatever may have been the case in the infancy of the world, and whatever may be the case with particular tribes even now, the great majority of tribes and races have developed, in a more or less mature form, some system of religious belief. Even though religion should not be a universal characteristic of man-

kind, there are facts abundantly sufficient to show that it is a genuine instinct of humanity; and that, as men advance in culture and civilization, their religious instincts express themselves, as a rule, the more strongly and the more distinctly. Homer, long ago, did not generalize too boldly when he said, 'All men yearn after gods.'[1] Man, almost as soon as he can reflect, is conscious that he did not make either himself or the world about him. The contemplation of nature, so vast, so wonderful, so varied, so picturesque, forces upon him the conviction that it must be the work of some being, possessing a mind similar to his own, but immeasurably greater, and more powerful. At first, perhaps, men deified natural forces or agencies, or they thought of many gods, of gods who, as it were, took charge of and presided over particular departments of nature: but a tendency to attribute all to one supreme God, or even to one single God, often manifested itself. The idea of a maker or creator of the world and man was thus arrived at. Then man, in virtue of the nature with which he has been endowed, rises to a sense of right and wrong: he feels that if he does

[1] *Odyss.* iii. 48.

wrong his god is displeased: and he acquires the sense of sin. He makes offerings to his god, to thank him, it may be, for the gifts of spring or harvest, which he has sent, or to propitiate him, if he thinks he has displeased him: and so the ideas of sacrifice and atonement arise. Religious festivals of different kinds are celebrated, as acts of homage and gratitude to the powers on which man's happiness and welfare depend. Rites of initiation and purification are adopted, witnessing to the idea of a life higher than a merely natural life, and to the need of cleansing after defilement. In some religions also the idea of a communion with the tribal deity appears: and so the worshippers partake of a common sacrificial meal, of which the deity also is supposed to partake, or they eat, for instance, a dough image of their god. They hope thereby to participate in a divine life communicated to them, which they believe will be to them a protection, and source of life and strength. There are many religions also in which the idea of an incarnation is found. And I need hardly say how common in all parts of the world is the custom of prayer to a national deity.

The beliefs and practices which I have here

rapidly noted, and the number of which might be readily increased, are more or less common to all the religions of the world. But they are also the ideas which, in a purer and higher form, are those of our own religion, of Christianity; they thus form connecting links between those religions and our own. The ideas of creation, of sin, of sacrifice, of atonement, of communion, embody central truths of the Christian religion. It is true, they are found generally, in heathen religions, in a crude, grotesque, or perverse form: but they are there; they are the ideas which these heathen nations believe in, and desire, as well as they can do, to express; and they are the same ideas which, in a purer, more elevated, and spiritual form, are of the essence of Christianity. Christianity is the highest, and indeed the absolute religion: but other religions share with it common features. Other religions express imperfectly the truths which spring out of the relation in which the human mind, constituted as it is, feels that it stands to the being, or beings, which it recognizes above it; and these are just the same truths which find a higher, more spiritual, more satisfying recognition

in Christianity. There are thus features in which Christianity resembles other religions, and features in which it differs from them. But things standing in this relation to one another can be compared. There thus arises the science of the Comparative Study of Religions, i. e. of other religions compared with each other, and also with Christianity. This implies no disparagement to Christianity: it remains the most spiritual and perfect religion that we can imagine; but it has features in which other religions more or less resemble it, or in which they differ from it; and so they can be compared.

The existence of beliefs and practices such as these among so many religions of the world is an important witness to the truth of Christianity. It shows that the instincts of which they are the expression,—even though it may be the struggling and imperfect expression,—are rooted in human nature, and that they have a real claim to be satisfied; it thus creates a strong presumption that the religion which satisfies them most completely is the highest and the truest. Long ago, a Christian Father, Tertullian, who lived about 200 A.D., wrote a treatise which he called 'The Witness of the Soul by nature Christian',

in which he developed this argument: he pointed to the religious beliefs and practices of the Gentiles as testifying to the truth of principles more fully satisfied by Christianity: the soul, he argued, was thus by nature Christian; it accepted already in principle so many truths about God and His relation to the world and man which Christians also held, that it ought consistently to go further, and accept them in the fuller and more reasonable form in which they were presented by Christianity. And in modern times, not many years since (1881), a Bampton Lecturer in this University, the present Bishop of Salisbury, argued similarly that non-Christian religious systems bore witness to convictions and aspirations on the part of man which were only fully satisfied by the faith of Christ.

There is also another point to which I may refer briefly. Christianity resembles other religions in having had a *history*. Since the times of the Apostles, when St. Paul planted infant Churches in different parts of Asia and Europe, it has undergone many remarkable developments: new practices, and sometimes new beliefs, have sprung up in it: it has divided, and, in its reformed branches, often subdivided: in its

different parts, also, great differences both in doctrine and in organization have prevailed. More than that, Christianity sprang out of an antecedent religion, the religion of Israel. This also had a history, and we can trace in the Old Testament some of the stages through which it passed. On its ceremonial side, the religion of Israel had links connecting it with the religions of neighbouring peoples: such institutions as sacrifice, and purifications, and religious pilgrimages, and a priesthood, were, for instance, nothing peculiar to Israel; they were shared by the Israelites with their neighbours: there are also frequent examples of rites and usages prescribed in the Pentateuch to which analogies have been found in many different parts of the world. But the Israelites, when they adopted such usages, adapted them always to the spirit of their own higher religion, and made them the vehicle of its higher teaching: they were thus spiritualized by them in a manner to which among other nations there has been no parallel. And so they were adapted to prepare the way for Christianity. The ceremonial observances of the Jewish theocracy were, however, unsuited for a religion in which Gentiles, living in all

parts of the world, were to share: St. Paul taught that they were not to be imposed upon Gentile converts; and the Christian Church discarded them. But the *spiritual* principles of the religion of Israel, including many finding expression in its institutions—such ideas, for instance, as the belief in One God, sacrifice, sin, atonement, forgiveness—were naturally retained, and became indeed part of the very essence of the Christian faith.

The religions of the world, strange as some of their beliefs and practices seem to us to be, must thus have their appointed place in the providential order of the world. Why indeed the human mind has been so constituted as to create this extraordinary diversity of religious beliefs, why the brighter light granted of old to the people of Israel, and since the advent of Christ to those who have been His followers, was not from the first more widely diffused, is more than we can say: we can see but a part of the entire plan upon which God deals with men; perhaps if we saw the whole, we should see the reason more clearly. But we cannot doubt that it is a part of His plan for the gradual education of our race. And we must remember

that, although when placed side by side with Christianity, the inferiority, and even in some cases the degradation, of other religions, becomes apparent, yet when a heathen religion is *not* brought side by side with Christianity, but is practised by those who have never heard of Christianity, and who know nothing better, it is the expression of some of the deepest and truest instincts of the human soul, of its cravings for something higher than itself, of its needs and wants, its gratitude and its contrition, its hopes and fears; and as Malachi declared, its homage—offered honestly and earnestly—is accepted by God, as if it were offered to Himself. St. Paul himself, we may remember, said in his speech on Mars' hill, that it was God's purpose in planting the earth with men of one blood 'that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us: for in Him we live, and move, and have our being' (Acts xvii. 27, 28). The religions of the Gentiles are thus, in St. Paul's view, fulfilments—however imperfect, however faltering, however earth-bound—of a purpose which God had in planting mankind upon the earth, and efforts, however 'groping', to satisfy

the innate aspirations of the soul towards Him.

And so the Bishops, assembled lately from different regions of the world at Lambeth, have expressed themselves on the subject of non-Christian religions in these words:—'Christians must never hesitate to look for what is true and good in them, to recognize that they have had a place in the purpose of the one loving God of all the earth, and to try to lead men by the truths which they know to Him, the Truth, in whom all truths meet.' These words breathe the true spirit in which the Christian should regard the religions of the world: they breathe also the true spirit in which missionary enterprise should be conducted—to lead men on by the truths that they know to the higher truths which as yet they do not know. Let us with all our heart thank God, who has brought us into the clear and pure light of His Gospel; and let it be our earnest prayer that He will bless the efforts made to bring others into the same light, that so, in His good time, the kingdoms of the world may become the kingdom of His Christ.

NOTES

On Mal. i. 11 see further G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets* (in the 'Expositor's Bible'), vol. ii, 1898, pp. 347, 359; and the Commentary of the present writer in the second volume of the *Minor Prophets* in the 'Century Bible', 1906, p. 304 f. The Authorized Version has '*shall be* great', '*shall be* offered': but (as the italics show) no verb is expressed in the Hebrew; and the context makes it clear that the reference must be to the prophet's own present.

An interesting exposition, from a Christian standpoint, of many typical forms of Pagan belief, and comparison of them with corresponding truths of Christianity, will be found in Canon Macculloch's *Comparative Theology* (in the 'Churchman's Library'), 1902. See also, especially on the question whether it may be said that all human races possess some form of religion, the address of Mr. E. S. Hartland, President of Section I ('Religions of the Lower Culture'), at the recent Oxford Congress.

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